

THRESHING

By Adrian Hansen

"Next to Christmas and the Fourth of July, the most fun of the entire year was at threshing time.

"The huge grain stacks stood like yellow igloos ready to be consumed by the machine. The wagons, loaded with poles, iron rods, chains, and all the equipment would come first. Finally, the big, red, box-like threshing machine, drawn by two teams of horses, would be driven in between the stacks and staked into position. The straw carrier at the end of the machine reached way out behind like a flat tail, with its endless chain of slats ready to carry the straw into the stack. At the end, were the rows of teeth to grasp the grain and force it into the machine.

"Now came the exciting part. The heavy iron driving rod was put into position, reaching from the thresher and the separator, to the horse-power platform. This was a floor over a huge cogwheel lying flat on the hub. From this platform several poles extended, usually five poles. To each of these poles was hitched a team of horses, and they traveled round and round in a circle pulling the large wheel which connected with a smaller cogwheel on the end of the big driving rod. As this rotated, it propelled the mechanism of the separator.

"Of course, we never paid much attention to all this detail. The thing to really see and hear was the shout of the driver getting all the horses to start at once. Then there was the low growl of the machine as it began to operate, getting louder and higher in pitch as it picked up speed. Soon the noise was so deafening everyone had to shout to be heard. The dust rose in stifling clouds, especially back of the straw carrier. The man who worked there wore goggles over his eyes and his big red bandanna handkerchief was tied over his mouth and nose. All the workers wore bandannas tied around their necks to keep out the chaff.

"By now the operation had settled into a rhythm of movement. The horses stepped the same gait around and around the circle, the driver turning and lightly cracking his whip. The men on the stack dropped the bundles in turns onto the feeder platform. Two men stood there, the first with a sharp knife with which he cut the twine from each bundle before pushing it to the next man, who fed it evenly, heads first, into the machine.

"The grain poured from the side of the machine into the half-bushel measures which were emptied into sacks, and the grain was carried to the granary. Each man carried three measures each trip. It took at least three men to carry the grain from the thresher to the granary, and they ran on the way back with the empty sacks. They often used the sacks to give a playful slap at the man with a load on his

back as they met; or, to our great glee, they might include one of us in this play, making us feel very much a part of things.

"The man in the straw stood hip deep in the loose stuff, forking it back away from the carrier. At times he would be almost buried.

"There was a chaff carrier, too. A man with a huge wooden fork with wide tines moved the chaff as it sifted between the slats of the straw carrier. He kept a red bandanna tied over his nose and mouth to keep out the smothering dust, but even then it must have been a very miserable job.

"To us children he had a special attraction because he was really in this big event right up to his ears. Before long his eyebrows and hair not covered by his hat would be thick with chaff. What a wonderful show he put on when the machine stopped and he used his floppy old felt hat to beat the chaff from his shoulders and back, and grinned at us from his mask-like face.

"The men were not the only ones who were busy at threshing time. Mother and the girls had to prepare the meals for the crew.

"There were six or eight regulars who followed the machine, and then each farmer had to get extras to carry grain, take care of the straw and, sometimes, pitch the bundles from the stack to the machine. This meant there might be from twelve to fifteen men to feed. And when it was threshing time, they all showed up for the meals, even breakfast. Of course the men who operated the machine stayed right with it night and day.

"Breakfast was served by sunrise at the latest. Dinner was at noon, and such food as we were expected to provide! A woman's reputation as a cook was often based on how she fed the threshers. It soon became common knowledge.

"There was not much stress placed on how it was served, but was there enough and was it good? There had to be meat -- roasts, steak, or chicken -- lots of mashed potatoes, stacks of homemade bread or biscuits, several vegetables, pickles, jam and jelly. Pie, cake, or rice pudding was served for dessert.

"The women and children waited until the men were fed, but that was expected, and it was a real entertainment to see how much food could be consumed in so short a time. There was always enough food left over, although we had to wash part of the dishes before there were enough dishes to go round the second time.

"When the threshing was done, the straw stack looked like a yellow mountain to us children, and did we explore it! We would roll down the smooth trail left by the straw carrier until we looked as if we were made of straw, and our clothes were so full of chaff we could hardly endure the scratching. That was the price we had to pay for our fun, but it was worth it all.

"Then we played horse and tramped round and round the deep tracks